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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001308

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, NEA/IPA, NEA/MAG

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/12/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC LE IS LY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI CALLS OUT ISRAEL AND QADHAFI ON ANNIVERSARY OF MISSING IMAM

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri blamed Israel and the forces of terrorism for trying to destabilize Lebanon. Berri made his remarks at a rally on August 31 marking the 30th anniversary of the disappearance of Imam Musa Sadr. In the same speech, Berri said he holds Libyan leader Qadhafi personally responsible for the disappearance of Amal's founder and spiritual leader. On September 2, Shia Minister Ibrahim Shamseddine told Pol/Econ Chief he planned to ask the cabinet to file an official complaint in the case of Sadr's disappearance with the International Court of Justice. End summary.

BERRI BLAMES ISRAEL,  
DEFENDS THE "RESISTANCE"

¶12. (SBU) Amal leader and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri called Israel and terrorism the destabilizing forces in Lebanon during an August 31 rally in the southern town of Nabatieh marking the 30th anniversary of the disappearance of Amal founder and Lebanese Shia spiritual leader Imam Musa Sadr. Berri told rally-goers "Israeli threats against Lebanon should be taken seriously;" but it is Israel, he said, that is trying to destabilize Lebanon and its economy. In addition, Berri accused Israel of sowing internal strife by creating sectarian rifts among Lebanon's multiconfessional population after Israel's failure in the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war.

¶13. (SBU) Citing continued "Israeli aggression," Berri said "the resistance is a necessity Lebanon cannot do without." He went on to say that the resistance was created because of the "state's failure to protect and defend the south," referencing the creation of the Amal movement in the mid-1970s.

QADHAFI "PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE"  
FOR DISAPPEARANCE OF SADR

¶14. (SBU) Imam Musa Sadr immigrated to Lebanon in the late 1950s from his native Iran to work for the rights of Shia in Lebanon's southern cities. In 1974, he founded the "Movement

of the Deprived," which attracted thousands of followers. The following year, he created Amal, the military wing of the movement. Sadr, and two companions, disappeared following a visit to Libya. The Libyan authorities claim that Sadr departed Tripoli and was headed to Rome. Italian authorities say Sadr never arrived. Luggage belonging to Sadr and his companions was found in Tripoli, however no trace of them was ever found. In 2004, Sadr's passport surfaced in Italy during another criminal forgery trial.

¶15. (SBU) Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi has repeatedly denied any involvement in the disappearance. However, on August 27, an investigative judge affiliated with Nabih Berri's Amal party issued an indictment against the Libyan president in a Lebanon court. Berri, in his speech to the Shia masses, said he held Qadhafi "personally responsible" for Sadr's disappearance. Many Lebanese Shiites believe Sadr was killed on Qadhafi's orders; others believe he is still alive and being held in a Libyan jail. Qadhafi has not visited Lebanon since Sadr's disappearance.

SHAMSEDDINE WANTS TO MOVE  
THE CASE TO THE HAGUE

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¶16. (C) Independent Shia Minister of Administrative Reform Ibrahim Shamseddine told Pol/Econ Chief on September 2 he would like the case moved out of Lebanese courts and to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague. Shamseddine claims Amal and Hizballah are using Sadr's disappearance for their own purposes. He would prefer to

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internationalize the matter by transferring it to the Hague and remove it from Lebanon's domestic political situation. Shamseddine asked if the U.S. would object if the case were raised in the ICJ. Pol/Econ Chief responded that we would look into the matter.

COMMENT

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¶17. (C) Berri's comments about Israel come as no surprise. In recent meetings, he has repeated the same concerns about Israeli overflights, calling them "provocations." However, we believe his speech was clearly designed to energize the crowds. We have no clear answer as to why Amal decided to wait thirty years before filing a legal claim in the Sadr case. However, political and judicial observers do not expect any real traction on the case in Lebanon. Post seeks Department guidance on whether the U.S. would object to Shamseddine's push to move the case to the ICJ.

SISON